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Confronting Terrorism

Two recent news items prompted Americans to think, for just a moment, about one of the gravest potential threats to the security of the free world — terrorism. The first was a report in the *Washington Post* detailing how a counter-terrorist force with CIA connections bombed the home of a suspected terrorist leader in Beirut, missing the target but causing hundreds of casualties. The second was a sensational announcement by the still mysterious Islamic Jihad (Holy War). After kidnapping two more westerners in Lebanon, this fundamentalist Moslem group warned that, unless convicted terrorists are released from prisons throughout the Middle East, it would unleash upon the United States a military campaign of unprecedented severity which would bring "catastrophic consequences" in its wake.

Reaction to these events lays bare the deep ambivalence with which the West in general and the American people in particular regard the problem of terrorism and how to combat it. Hijackings, kidnappings and threats of violence play on the fear of Western public opinion in order to win concessions from the victim's governments.

When more than two hundred U.S. Marines were killed in a suicide bomb attack in Lebanon two years ago, public support in this country for an overt American presence crumbled, hastening the Marines' withdrawal. Public opinion, never fully able to grasp the reasoning behind the Marines' presence in the first place, was relieved by the Administration's decision to bring them home.

But the withdrawal of the Marines did not end the American presence in Lebanon. The U.S. embassy remains in Beirut, as does a prominent (if diminishing) press corps. These official and unofficial representatives of the United States are a favorite

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target of a variety of fanatical groups, each with its own agenda and each determined to use whatever tactics necessary to wring an unlimited number of concessions from this country and its allies.

The United States government has suffered terrorist attacks against its diplomatic and military facilities throughout Western Europe and the Middle East. Mercifully, however, the United States itself has so far remained largely immune. But extremists who previously stopped at nothing to inflict suffering on Americans — any Americans — are unlikely to tarry long before attempting to subject American cities to terror.

The Administration has not been idle in the face of this threat. The CIA, we learn from the Post, has been using its considerable resources to combat terrorism at its source. Yet the uproar following the Post's front-page expose suggests that Americans are not yet ready to allow their government to do what is necessary to ensure their safety. To many the threat remains merely a figment of a paranoid defense community's imagination.

Administration officials and authorities of world terrorism believe, however, that *the terrorist threat to the United States is not only real, but imminent!* The Islamic Jihad's apocalyptic warning should have brought this fact home to American public opinion. Instead, a State Department spokesman's statement that the

United States would not submit to terrorist blackmail was juxtaposed on network shows with Jesse Jackson as he called the Administration to be flexible in its response to the terrorists' demands.

After the outbreak of World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt found himself hamstrung in his efforts to support the allies in their struggle against Hitler by strong isolationist sentiment in this country. Only after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was America shocked into the realization that it, too, was vulnerable.

Today, once again, a faint and distant threat is growing in the form of international terrorism; and, once again, isolationist sentiment has led many Americans to choose appeasement over resolute action. In 1982, public opposition to the Marines' presence in Lebanon caused the Reagan Administration to waver in its commitment to stand firm in the face of terror. The result was an American withdrawal that paid a dividend to the terrorists who killed so many.

Experience shows that the most valuable weapon in the fight against terrorism is the refusal to submit to terrorist blackmail. In refusing to accede to the demands of the Islamic Jihad, the Reagan Administration has again taken the first step towards overcoming this phenomenon. But we have also seen that public support is a prerequisite to success in the war against terrorism: without it, the determination of those who must make the difficult choices that are part of the fight will fade and the war will be lost.

Introducing partisan politics into a non-partisan issue can only damage the interests of the United States and the free world. Those who help shape American public opinion should consider this before advocating the "flexibility" that encourages the rule of terror and the gun. □